

Guide to Drum Maintenance

by Bob Saydlowski, Jr.

Drums, like any musical instrument, must be kept in good condition to repay you with good sound and performance. The following should be of some help to percussionists.

Number one priority for all drums are cases. All drummers know how rough fellow band members and roadies can be on drums. Good protection for your instrument is a must. Would a guitarist keep his treasured Strat or Les Paul in a thin, soft guitar cover? On the road, skycaps and other airline people are careless with band equipment.

Anvil makes excellent road cases. They are very expensive, but well worth the money. Nothing can destroy them (except being run over by an occasional steamroller). Other companies however, make cases of comparable quality at a lower price. Fibre cases are fine for groups doing limited local travel.

All cases should be tight enough to prevent excessive humidity from seeping in, and if possible, lined with foam rubber to keep the drum from bouncing against the hard corners of the case. Special care must be taken with metal drums. If not protected, a deep scratch can expose the steel underlayer to the air and cause oxidation. Cases should also be stencilled with the group's name or your own name and address to prevent mix-up or loss.

Carrying spare parts is also a good idea. Wing nuts and screws can easily be dropped from stands, snare strands can be popped, bolts can strip, lug nuts can come loose or break, heads can break, etc. Billy Cobham once said that his road crew carries enough parts to be able to build a kit on the road if necessary. If your group is doing a week-long engagement in Elephant Breath, Idaho and something breaks the first night, you're stuck without any spares. And the nearest music or hardware store is probably miles and miles away. Don't let this happen to you!

Everything gets dirty sometime, but when cleaning the finish on your drums, abrasive compounds or rough polishing

cloths should be avoided. Instead, the shell should be cleaned with a mild detergent such as glass cleaner. But do not use the type that comes in an aerosol propellant, as this may damage the finish. Some finishes clean nicely by rubbing lightly with a damp cloth.

Tension screws should be removed and lubricated twice a year. All accumulated grit and dirt should be removed from the threads. The screws should be soaked in kerosene, wiped dry, and relubricated with a grease compound such as petroleum jelly. Latin Percussion's Lug-Lube does the same job.

Drumheads should be cleaned periodically because accumulated grime will affect the tonal quality. Dirt can be removed effectively with a damp cloth and a light application of scouring powder. When the head is clean, it should be wiped with a clean, dry cloth. After a period of time, the batter head will lose its coated surface and the transparent film will be exposed. At this point, the head should generally be replaced. Drumstick impressions or dents can be removed since they, too, can affect tone quality. Removing these dents is simple, but must be done carefully. Hold a heat source such as a lit cigarette about W above the drumhead. Gently blow on the tip so the heat will contact the impression. If done carefully, the dent will be removed and the tone of the head restored. Also, like guitar strings, drumheads go dead after a while. Your ear can tell you when to replace the head.

In the case of an internal drum repair, take note as to where the drumhead label is in relation to one of the lugs. The sound of the drum will change if the head is not placed back in exactly the same position, especially if the head has been mated to the shell for a while. It's preferable to remove the bottom head for work on the drum shell. The sound of the drum won't be disturbed. For a bass drum repair, the front head should be removed. Before replacing the head, rub some paraffin wax around the edge of the shell where the head will

connect. This makes drumhead tension easier and smoother once it's in place. If possible, the front bass drum head should not be removed for live performance. This will structurally weaken the shell because of the weight of the tom-toms. A round hole can be cut in the bass drum head to achieve the same sound and projection of an open front. If you must leave the front head off, be sure to buy a stabilizer (made by several drum companies) to prevent damaging the shell.

A dented metal shell can be repaired by any auto body shop. Severely damaged shells should be returned to the manufacturer. Small dents, gouges, or holes in a wood shell drum may be patched with epoxy cements and fillers. Liquid fiberglass can also be used to repair holes or cracks.

Last, but certainly not least, are the cymbals. Heavy abrasives should never be used to clean cymbals. Lots of companies manufacture a special cymbal cleaner, the best being Zildjian's liquid cleaner or Buckaroo's solid cleaner. Even jeweler's rouge works fine. Buffing wheels should never be used. Excessive heat will take the temper out of the cymbal and leave it full of "dead" spots. A small crack in the edge of a cymbal that's 1/2" or less can be ground out on a grinding wheel. Drilling holes at the edge of a crack or grinding out a "V" are only temporary measures that will stop further cracking for a short time. Anything larger than W cannot be ground out without changing the tone of the cymbal for worse. To minimize cracking: 1) Use a cymbal bag or separate fibre case to protect your cymbals. 2) Keep wing nuts and washers fairly loose so the cymbal may vibrate freely. 3) Avoid direct blows to the cymbal. 4) Select cymbals big enough to do the job. No matter how well they are made, small overworked cymbals will be subject to early breakage.

Your instrument can only give you good performance if you take care of it properly. What average drummer can afford a new drum kit every year?